THE LANGUAGE OF GOD
John 1:1-18
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The early Christian Church assigned emblems to each of the four Gospels. The emblems, or symbols, appear in early church literature, stained glass and ancient statuary. The emblem for Matthew is the lion of Judah, because the author emphasizes the Jewish messiahship of Jesus. Mark's symbol is a man, representing the straightforwardness of the account. Luke's figure is an ox, representing the sacrifice and service which are dominant in his account. The emblem for the fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John, from which we read this morning, is an eagle. I had known that, but I never knew the reason. The pulpit in the chapel at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, if memory serves me correctly, is an ornate eagle; a not very comforting image to contemplate I used to think, when my mind drifted from a scholarly sermon during worship on Thursday A.M., but I never understood what it meant. I stumbled onto the meaning this week. In fact I called the Columbus Zoo and confirmed the scientific truth of the matter. The ancient world knew - what I had to call the Zoo to confirm - that "of all living creatures the eagle alone can look straight into the sun and not be dazzled". And so the eagle was assigned to the fourth Gospel because"of all the New Testament writers John has the most penetrating gaze into the eternal mysteries and the eternal truths, and into the very mind of God." (William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John, Vol.I, p.XV).

I am drawn to the words of the fourth Gospel each Advent..."In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God...and the word became flesh and dwelt among us." William Barclay suggested that those words constitute "the greatest adventure of religious thought ever achieved by the human mind." (Ibid, p.2). They do not make for a Christmas story you can tell to your children gathered around the family tree...But, for me, they constitute the essential part of the celebration. They allow me, for a moment at least, to sustain my gaze into the infinite mysteries of God himself. "In the beginning was the word...and the word became flesh..."

But let us begin more modestly than that. Perhaps eagles can do it, but it doesn't take much looking at the sun to render us sightless. Let us begin at the level of our own vision, our knowledge about God. Where does it come from? Where, in your experience, did you learn?

Books about God, perhaps? Religion is big business in the publishing trade. There are brief paperbacks by the thousands, and, for the very determined, twelve volume sets of dogmatic theology. There has probably been more printer's ink invested in the subject of God over the centuries than any other. The assumption, throughout, is that knowledge of God is at least accessible in books.

Or perhaps your knowledge of God came as a result of intellectual pursuit. Lectures, Sunday School classes, workshops, college survey courses, University departments, and theological seminaries are structured around the assumption that God is at least partially available through some sort of academic process.

Perhaps your perceptions of God are related to a very private experience. When important people have personal religious experiences they often end up as best selling books and ultimately a series of seminars - and all of it assumes that knowledge of God comes about as a result of something that happens to the individual. Typically, the person has met God after a harrowing personal encounter with danger, a close shave with death or some other hair-raising adventure. Typically, God has spoken out of the darkness in a way audible to the individual alone. The experience is therefore, totally subjective

and not really available to other people. Often the effect of reading about grand and glorious revelations someone else has experienced is to make the person feel guilty or inadequate for not having had a similar experience.

However, I do not deprecate personal religious experiences. Not at all. God well may choose to startle some people dramatically. Some may come to faith because of a shattering revelation. It simply is not that way for everybody and therefore of very limited usefulness in conveying the faith to others. I certainly do not minimize the importance of theology, the reading of books and the attending of classes. My conclusion, however, is that knowledge of God is not imparted, essentially, by reading what others say about Him or listening to lectures on the topic.

How do I know about God? The answer, frankly, is particular for each of us, and all we can do is testify as to how it has been for us. Mostly, I've always thought, I know about God because a little lady by the name of Mrs. Evans was faithful. She was my Sunday School teacher through the know-it-all days of adolescence, and remarkably managed to keep caring about me. Into the dry skepticism of college would come the little devotional magazine she sent me and, always, a note from her. And I know about God I suppose because a very old grandmother who had concluded that my theology was more pagan even than my style of life kept telling me she was praying for me and sending me $10.00 bills at opportune times. There are many other teachers - vehicles of the Divine, if you will: parents, brother, spouse, friends. It is the same, I am certain, for you. What we know about God has come to us mainly through relationships. A part of growing spiritually, I have concluded, is going back through one's personal history and identifying those persons who were priests to us, those who imparted something of God to us: identifying them, celebrating them and giving God thanks for them.

When God wanted to convey the essence of himself to his creatures, therefore, He reached across the gap between the finite and the infinite in a way that invited relationship. Frederick Buechner has said that beautifully..."when God speaks to his creation, what comes out is not ancient Hebrew or the King James Version or a sentiment suitable for framing in the pastor's study. On the contrary; the word became flesh and that means that when God wanted to say what God is all about and what man is all about and what life is all about, it wasn't a sound that emerged but a man. Jesus was his name. He was dynamite. He was the Word of God." (Peculiar Treasures, p.72).

At the time the author wrote it down it was a very controversial idea. In a sense it still is, but at the end of the First Century when the fourth Gospel was written, the whole civilized world thought and talked Greek. The best Biblical scholar working on the fourth Gospel is Roman Catholic Raymond Brown. Brown writes "...that the ultimate encounter with the (word) of God would be when the word became flesh would be unthinkable...instead of supplying the liberation from the material world that the Greek mind yearned for, the word of God was now inextricably bound to human history." (The Anchor Bible, p.31).

What that means is that the Greeks took a very dim view of the physical, material world. The philosopher/emperor Marcus Aurelius advised his subjects to "despise the flesh". Plutarch and Philo talked about God in the most remote, ethereal terms possible. The hottest religious idea around, the topic of conversation among the intellectual elite was something called "Gnosticism". Basically, that is the division of all reality into two realms, darkness and light, world and other-world, body and spirit. Greek thinking, particularly in this form, concluded that, darkness, world, body are evil: light, spirit, other-world - are good. Religion, therefore has to do with the spirit. It is, often, the way to remove oneself, as totally as possible, from the realm of flesh, material, world, body. It is the oldest intellectual mistake in the history of humankind. It is also the most durable. It is alive and very well twenty centuries after the fact.

To begin with, the fourth Gospel needed to say something about the world - about reality - about fundamental things to the Greeks. The word became flesh means that the world is good, the flesh God's word became is OK. Contrary to the current cocktail party fad, it is not to be despised, denigrated, escaped. Rather it is to be lived in, enjoyed, celebrated. That is a basic position: so profound it is hard to keep putting in words. The world of creation is good. God knew what He was doing when He made us... Sometimes it takes a poet to help us see it and affirm it. Edna St. Vincent Millay comes t my mind when I'm working at it...

"To kiss the fingers of the rain,
To drink into my eyes the shine
Of every slanting line,
To catch the freshened, fragrant breeze
From drenched and dripping apple trees...
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart!"
(Renascence, Edna St. Vincent Millay).

Or...the Psalmist, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork..."

The fourth Gospel, with the unblinking eye of the eagle wants us to know that the world is good: that the word God spoke in creation, was spoken again in the birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

It is, however, a very durable heresy. We are still clutching after it, trying to divorce world and other-world, body and spirit, word and flesh. We do it unconsciously mostly, because our culture has bred it into us when, for instance, we devalue the human body. We deny the sanctity of the body the word of God became when we ignore its well being, medically, when we simply refuse to take care of ourselves, or when we leer at it in darkened theatres and pornographic literature. Only a culture which holds the body, flesh, humanity in contempt, produces dehumanizing, exploitive pornography.

We show contempt for the world God created good when we pour our poisons into the streams, oceans, and air and somehow, incredibly, find political arguments to excuse ourselves. We show utter contempt for the wholistic goodness of the created order by killing off entire species from the family of life of which we are one part.

The Greek heresy is alive and very well, when we gather our piety about us and argue that there are big pieces of common life with which religion has nothing to do. Economics, politics, corporate policy, tax legislation - to suggest that those words represent a part of human endeavor unaffected by - or unrelated to religion, as it has now become fashionable to do, is, quite simply, to take a strong stand for the religion of the Greek culture in the first century.

Dominican priest Matthew Fox puts it bluntly..."We have invented a false spirituality which has tried to be a way of escaping this world, putting to death the senses, fleeing the body, history and the body politic. Unless my biology is faulty the good news of the incarnation is that God became an animal - a mammal, homo sapiens." (The Christian Ministry, 11/80, quoted by Owen L. Norvant, The Word Became Flesh, p.22).

The implications of John's assertion are theological, philosophical: the created order is good, the human body is good: our humanity is good. The implications are also ethical. There is always, just beneath the surface, a moral imperative about the Christmas celebration. The word which became flesh, frankly, wants to become flesh

again. That happens when we allow the living Christ so live in us. What emerges when God speaks about himself, remember, is not a dissertation in Hebrew, but a human being, a life.

And so the word becomes flesh whenever we take upon ourselves the work God has said He wants to do: whenever, for instance, we heal a relationship which is broken. Word becomes flesh whenever we reach out in love to someone who is lonely. Word becomes flesh whenever peace and justice receive more than lip service from us. Word becomes flesh when someone challenges exploitive stereotypes and racism and sexism masquerading as cheap humor. Word becomes flesh when individual people keep trying to insert caring and compassion into the bureaucracies of our common life.

Whenever God wanted to say a word about himself what emerged was a man, a life. The word became flesh. That word becomes flesh whenever we allow it to be incarnate in our lives.

It was fashionable, not many years ago, to become exercised about the fact that Christmas seemed to have more to do with Santa Claus than Jesus. "Put Christ back into Christmas" was the slogan. The people who were involved meant well. There is a sense in which an American Christmas always borders on the vulgar, the pagan, the greedy. There i a sense in which we need to be reminded that tinsel, sleigh bells and lavish gifts are no intrinsically related to the Christian content of the event. But if the effort results i a "spiritualized" celebration it has rather badly missed the point. The Puritans tried that several centuries ago, outlawing the festive celebrations so that people could conce trate on the incarnation. Besides failing gloriously, the effort was, and is, wrong theologically.

There is nothing spiritual about the process of human birth. There may be intimations of the infinite about it for some people. But the process itself is about as human and earthy and bodily as you can get. Particularly a birth that happened, not in the antiseptic delivery room of a modern hospital, but in the middle of life, close to the warmth, and smells and reality of the earth. Christmas is not spiritual if what we mean by that word is something ethereal, disconnected from life.

There is something essentially right about what happens late in December, something potentially rich and full and authentic. At its best Christmas celebrates the birth but also the life into which the child was born. At its best, therefore, it is the heady mix of good, incarnational theology and the sweet aroma of pine, the tastes, the touch of a loved one's hand in yours, and the sound of glorious music. It is the gathering up of our humanness, the celebrating of life which has forever been made good by the birth of the child. It is, like the eagle, to look into the bright light of sun, and to see, for a moment in time, the mind and heart and will and face of God.

> "In the beginning was the word...and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."
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> Amen.

For the clarity of your word, God eternal, we are grateful. We have seen and heard. In Jesus, your Son, we have understood what You want us to be. As we celebrate His birth, grant us faith to be the living instruments of your will and word. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.